

WRITING FOR YOUR AUDIENCE

Why is the Audience Important?

Readers—not writers—determine the clarity and value of a paper’s argument and ideas. Factoring the audience into your writing ensures that you have provided necessary context, explained your argument clearly, and organized your ideas coherently; in short, it means that the readers who should understand your writing, can.

How to Determine Audience

Consider your audience when you are reviewing an assignment and choosing a topic. Often, your professor will give you the audience—themselves, your peers in class, the public, etc.—but this is not always provided. The audience is often implied by the format; a personal statement for grad school will likely be reviewed by the professors you would work with, a policy memo would be read by public policy experts in that subject, and literary analysis would be read by someone who is well-versed in the literature. If you cannot determine your audience, consider:

- ❖ Who is most likely to read your writing, based on topic or purpose?
- ❖ What do you want to accomplish with your writing, and what might that tell you about your audience?
- ❖ What would you write for a “general” audience (no specific field or topic knowledge)?
- ❖ Who can you ask for help to determine your audience?

Writing for your Audience

The features that make your audience distinct—age, education, values, assumptions, etc.—can affect what clear, persuasive writing looks like for them. Factoring these features into your writing makes it easier to provide necessary background information and craft a persuasive argument. Avoid making generalizations about your audience that could result in writing that is belittling or disrespectful, such as over explaining concepts or assuming biased views. Consider how your audience may impact the following features of a paper:

Background Information and Explanations: Does your audience know a lot of information about your topic already, or might this be their first time learning about it? How comprehensively you write about background information, explain terms and ideas, and set up your argument is determined by your audience’s prior knowledge.

Vocabulary/Terminology: The words and technical terms you use are determined by how knowledgeable your audience is on your topic. A PhD in the discipline will be familiar with topic-specific terms and acronyms, but the public may not be. Define terms that are unfamiliar to your audience.

Structure/Organization: The logic and clarity of your writing relies on how you organize ideas and connect them to form your argument. When structuring your paper, keep in mind your audience’s prior knowledge on the topic and what organizational expectations they may have. Consider the order in which you introduce topics, how you build upon ideas logically, and how other writers have structured similar arguments.

Rhetoric/Persuasion: In persuasive and argumentative writing, your audience is especially important because you are attempting to convince them of something through your writing. Your audience could have similar views as you and agree with you easily, or they could have diverging views and need more persuasive arguments and evidence to support your claims.